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SUBJECT: LAY MOVEMENTS, PART II: SANT'EGIDIO, COMUNION AND LIBERATION, AND OPUS DEI

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Summary

¶1. (U) This is the third in a series intended to facilitate cooperation with Holy See and Catholic Church entities to promote U.S. goals through a greater understanding of the Holy See's institutions, agencies and structures (reftel B). In this cable, we continue our discussion of ecclesial movements (reftel A) by looking at three associations that are actively promoting Church values in a secular world: The Community of Sant'Egidio, Communion and Liberation, and Opus Dei.

Strength in diversity

¶2. (SBU) Because of their number and diversity, no specific organization can be said to be particularly representative of ecclesial movements (a.k.a. lay movements and international associations of the faithful) as a whole. A look at the Holy See's Directory of International Associations of the Faithful is revealing -- listed are movements such as "the Community of the Beatitudes", "the International Christian Union of Business Executives", "Couples for Christ", "the International Catholic Conference of Scouting" and "the International Union of Catholic Esperantists" (which, among other things, broadcasts in Esperanto through Radio Vatican). Among the many associations are two movements that originated in Italy and have been particularly active and successful in reaching out to world leaders and political personalities: the Community of Sant'Egidio, and Communion and Liberation. Also well known in Italy -- and beyond -- is Opus Dei, a prelature (i.e., a diocese based on membership rather than geography) and lay movement that originated in Spain but is headquartered in Rome and has a presence in many countries.

Community of Sant'Egidio

¶3. (U) The Community of Sant'Egidio was founded in the wake of the Second Vatican Council by a group of enthusiastic Roman high school students. Today, present in 70 nations on four continents, it has some 60,000 members engaged in a variety of development and charitable initiatives. The Community's mission has five elements: prayer, the communication of the Christian message, solidarity with the poor, ecumenism (i.e., the unity of the Christian churches), and inter-religious dialogue.

¶4. (U) USG contact to date -- including a visit with the Community by President Bush in the summer of 2007 -- has focused on inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, HIV/AIDS

programs in Africa, and Sant'Egidio's reconciliation and peacemaking efforts in the Balkans and Africa. Working closely with Sant'Egidio, Post has built support to help fund its HIV/AIDS treatment program in key target countries. The project has already received some funding in Mozambique through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and is rapidly expanding to more countries in Africa. As a result of our engagement, HHS formalized its relationship with Sant'Egidio in January 2005, signing a Memorandum of Understanding that promises expanded cooperation in the health field.

¶15. (U) Sant'Egidio is also known for its work in building on the late Pope John Paul II's initiative in convening the World Day of Peace in Assisi, Italy in 1986 - a meeting of all major world religions. Sant'Egidio launched its own series of inter-religious meetings with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and dialogue among all religions. Since that time, the Community has annually gathered representatives of different faiths and cultures from more than 60 countries. Often, as was the case in the 2007 meeting in Naples (reftel C), the peace gatherings include presentations by heads of state, ministers, and political personalities from around the world. A summit was held in Washington in 2006. The next meeting will take place in Cyprus in the fall of 2008.

¶16. (SBU) Sant'Egidio's leadership has proven to be shrewd in its communications strategies, attracting generous media coverage for the Community's activities. This, together with its interest in conflict resolution in hot spots around the world, has sometimes irked Vatican officials, who worry that the worthwhile peace initiatives of Sant'Egidio may be mistaken for the foreign policy of the Holy See. While the goals may be the same -- and Sant'Egidio is very close to a number of prominent Vatican officials -- the Holy See prefers quiet diplomacy and long-term strategies over public activism and limited timeframes. The Community of Sant'Egidio website is: www.santegidio.org

Communion and Liberation

¶17. (U) Communion and Liberation was established in Italy in 1954, originally as a group of Catholic public high school students. Although it remains primarily an Italian institution, Communion and Liberation established an international presence during the pontificate of the late Pope John Paul II (1978-2005). It currently has 48,000 members in 64 countries, with a particularly strong presence in Spain and Brazil.

¶18. (U) An annual week-long cultural and political festival known as the ""Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples,"" held in the Adriatic coastal resort town of Rimini each summer, has grown into a major Italian event, attracting thousands of visitors. The event seeks to create points of contact between people of different faiths and cultures. Among the world figures and personalities that at some point since 1980 have attended are Mother Teresa of Calcutta, former Polish ""Solidarity"" leader and president Lech Walesa, the Dalai Lama, former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the late Kosovar leader Ibrahim Rugova, US Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr., and the late Pope John Paul II. Issues addressed have included the fight against female genital mutilation in Kenya, religion in American society, women as the primary victims of Islamic fundamentalism, economic solidarity with the world's poor, European identity in the Third Millennium, and sustainable development.

¶19. (SBU) Regarded during its early history as a Catholic fundamentalist and anti-Communist political organization, today Communion and Liberation has shifted its energy away from partisan politics and more towards cultural, charitable and educational activities. Nevertheless, Communion and Liberation is said to be close to Silvio Berlusconi, former Italian Prime Minister and current leader of the Italian center-right party (Sant'Egidio, on the other hand, is said to be sympathetic to the former mayor of Rome and current leader of the Italian left, Walter Veltroni). The Communion and Liberation website is www.clonline.org

¶10. (U) The Cooperators of Opus Dei are men and women who belong to an association inseparably linked to Opus Dei, itself a one-of-a-kind ""personal prelature of the pope"". While the cooperators are not incorporated in the Prelature, they work with it to undertake educational and welfare projects with a view to contribute to the common good of society.

¶11. (U) Opus Dei was founded in 1928 in Spain by Father Jose Maria Escriva. Its purpose is to promote Catholic values in society through its members' everyday activities -- particularly work -- in the secular world. In 1930, the group was opened up to women. The organization received official papal recognition in 1947. Opus Dei has spread throughout Europe and into Latin America, and it entered the U.S. in 1949. While it does not publish financial statements, it reports once every five years directly to the pope.

¶12. (U) 2007 marked the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's elevation of Opus Dei to the status of a personal prelature (equivalent to a diocese but based on a specific group of people rather than on geographical territory). The founder was declared ""blessed"" in 1992 and elevated to sainthood in 2002. According to Vatican statistics, Opus Dei has some 86,000 lay members and almost 2000 priests. Opus Dei maintains 1800 churches and pastoral centers in 60 countries. It is governed by a bishop who holds the title of prelate.

¶13. (U) Opus Dei development and charitable activities include providing educational opportunities for rural families in the Philippines, vocational training for Peruvian women, and entrepreneurial formation for women in Kenya to start their own micro-businesses. In 2002, Opus Dei initiated a major development program focused on Africa. ""Harambee"" (All for One in Kiswahili) promotes educational programs in Africa and about Africa - developmental projects in the sub-Saharan region and awareness-building activities elsewhere designed to encourage a positive outlook on African culture. Most recent projects are a clinic providing medical services to 600 mothers and 1000 children in the outskirts of Kinshasa, DRC; a crafts training school in Madagascar for heads of family (70 percent male, 30 percent female); a teacher development project in Kenya targeting some 4500 educators over the next 3 years; and vocational training center for young refugee women in southern Sudan.

¶14. (SBU) Opus Dei does not share its membership lists, although members are not prevented from disclosing their own membership, if they wish to do so. Church observers have noted that this has contributed to accusations of secrecy and fueled the imagination of writers and conspiracy theorists. According to an officer at the Opus Dei's Information Office in Rome, in the past few years Dan Brown's ""the Da Vinci Code"" has led to many public inquiries. Many of them, he said, come from journalists of Asian countries who are hearing about Opus Dei for the very first time. Opus Dei's official website is www.opusdei.org.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Sant'Egidio, Communion and Liberation, and Opus Dei show ways in which ecclesial movements can channel the religious commitment of lay Catholics to specific charitable and political initiatives. In Italy -- and elsewhere -- they can also underpin the influence of the Vatican in domestic politics. These three organizations excel in their organizational capacity. The efficiency and effectiveness of their charitable work is widely recognized. In the case of Sant'Egidio and Communion and Liberation, the impact of initiatives in areas such as inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue is necessarily more difficult to quantify (Opus Dei does not organize such events).

¶16. (SBU) While skeptics question the value of ""talkfests"" that fail to translate into executable initiatives, the very presence of political personalities -- and the large crowds the events attract -- seem to indicate that political and religious leaders and significant parts of the public think they are valuable. At the very least, these gatherings provide a venue to float ideas that would be difficult to present in more formal settings. They also offer considerable scope for quiet networking that, over time, makes possible substantive dialogues between parties who once shunned each other. Both the Community of Sant'Egidio and Communion and Liberation would welcome the participation of high-ranking USG officials in their events. Post recommends that the Department consider sending a high ranking official to participate in the next Prayer for Peace meetings of the Sant'Egidio Community, set to take place in Cyprus in the fall of 2008.

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